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Trans-Communism in the Transpolitical Age

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## I. Transpolitics

He is truly a revolutionary who speaks of the world as non-separated.

Baudrillard introduced the word “transpolitics” to describe a world in which everything had become political. When everything is political, “politics” loses its ability to pick out a discrete sphere. This pattern was replicated in every field, so that the political became coterminous with the aesthetic, the economic, the sexual, etc. We are immediately confronted with the failure of concepts to “cut the world at its joints,” given that, in effect, there are no joints or “natural kinds” of distinction. Baudrillard confronts this quandary at the beginning of

*Symbolic Exchange and Death*:

Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on. All that remains for us is theoretical violence: speculation to the death, whose only method is the radicalisation of hypotheses. Even the code and the symbolic remain terms of simulation: it must be possible to extract them, one by one, from discourse.

Baudrillard’s undermining of his own core concepts reminds one of Wittgenstein’s dictum that we should remain silent about those things we cannot speak of; it is simply that for Baudrillard, it is impossible to speak *meaningfully* about anything. In *The Perfect Crime*, Baudrillard expresses this view, holding that “[the] artist, too, is always close to committing the perfect crime: saying nothing.” It is no surprise, therefore, that Baudrillard fixes on the poetic as a token of noble activity, since he refers to it as “a site of the extermination of value and the law.” Poetry is speech which does not drive at meaning, but rather seeks to undermine the reduction of ineffability into simplistic binary thinking. Baudrillard’s privileging of the poetic intersects

directly with his encounter with Marx. Baudrillard holds that poetry and the utopian beginnings rejected by Marx “have this radical presentness in common.” In contrast to the theory of alienation which would take hold in later Marxism, for Baudrillard “[utopia] regards every man and every society as already totally there, at each social moment, in its symbolic exigency.” It is likewise for the poetic, which Baudrillard returns to in his late work *The Agony of Power*; in it, Baudrillard uses the term poetic to describe the desirable singularities for which the field is opened by the decay of the universal.

To get a handle on the practical implications of Baudrillard’s almost mystical espousal of the poetic, it may be helpful to consider the implications of the militarization of society (remembering Clausewitz’s famous dictum that war is simply the continuation of politics by other means). It is intuitive for us to understand that in times of crisis, military concerns supersede all other values: if the nation does not survive, none of its political potentials can be actualized. Thus, everything is subordinated to military control, made ready-at-hand for the generals entrusted with the people’s salvation. Within the military framework, it’s clear that intelligence assumes the cardinal role: in order for strategy to be formulated effectively, facts on the ground must be known and infiltration of the enemy is ideal. With the concept of disinformation (psychological warfare), the aesthetic and the military are finally joined in the logic of the advertisement, which seeks to manipulate the target without raising alarm (or, if alarm is raised, it is by design and not in the crucially strategic area). In this, we see that the position of *secret power* assumes cardinal importance. This intersects Debord’s later analysis nicely when he says that in the integrated spectacle “the controlling center has now become occult” and that it seeks to turn “revolutionaries into secret agents.” Thus we see the world stage

taken over by conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, leaving us all wondering what the secret truth of power might be. It is here that Baudrillard's emphasis on the poetic is key.

A great insight into secrecy is given to us by Baudrillard when he writes that “[everything] that can be revealed lies outside the secret.”<sup>10</sup> Through this, we understand that the true stakes of transpolitics are not in machinations over hidden information, but rather what is most crucial is that which can never be expressed. This inexpressible, the ineffable, is of course beyond our conceptions of time and history, and therefore cannot be the target of any goal-oriented activity or historical analysis. For Baudrillard, since each of us is always already “totally there,” the fixation on building the good society in the future is merely an excuse to put off appreciating the present mystery. Hence, “the content of liberated man is, at bottom, of less importance than the abolition of the separation of the present and the future.” It is this theory of the secret which allows us to begin a sober analysis of the permeation of psychological warfare into all human activities without making inevitable the despair of never knowing what is really going on (who is secretly manipulating us). This idea is expressed in so many words by Breton, who is cited by Camus in *The Rebel* as holding that “[world] revolution and the terrible sacrifices it implies would only bring one advantage: ‘preventing the completely artificial precariousness of the social condition from screening the real precariousness of the human condition.’” In this context, Baudrillard's challenge to us to make the world “more inscrutable” is in no way in conflict with the utopian vision he shares in *Carnival and Cannibal* of “the single event that would, at a stroke, unmask the enormous conspiracy in which we are immersed.” After all, making public any secret information can only make the world more confusing, as it would destabilize all our political concepts and our understanding of history. The only real secret would

remain untouched, given that it can never be articulated.

Baudrillard distinguishes seduction from challenge by writing that “[in] a challenge one draws the other into one's area of strength, which, in view of the potential for unlimited escalation, is also his or her area of strength. Whereas in a strategy (?) of seduction one draws the other into one's area of weakness, which is also his or her area of weakness.”<sup>15</sup> We see the seductiveness of weakness in the fascination exacted by the giddy exposure of people’s “personal problems” and faults which plays out over and over in the media. Baudrillard saw this structural logic at work when he wrote that “Foucault argued that a whole culture was at one time engaged in the confession of sex. It has now gone over to the confession of wretchedness”. By this, Baudrillard understands that:

[the] new identity is the victim's identity. Everything is organized around the deprived, frustrated, handicapped subject, and the victim strategy is that of his acknowledgement as such. Every difference is asserted in the victimal mode of recrimination (of the reparation of a crime); others are called on only for purposes of recognition.

One can confess one’s suffering, one’s complicity, one’s doubt, fear of death and being alone, one’s mistakes and crimes- and in fact, most of our personal secrets are already documented automatically by various intelligence organs around the world. Hence we are weak in that we can never truly “stand for” positive principles convincingly: it is only too easy to reveal anyone to be a hypocrite, a hedonist, a fool. So, we must accept these terms when we enter the arena, part of the gift we bring to the transpolitical potlach: the gift of being willing to be seen, to draw attention and perhaps violence through ourselves through symbolic challenge.

In doing so, we endeavor to reveal power’s own weakness: its inability to ever be successful on its own terms, to constitute an irreversibility. There is nothing which will not

disappear. By exposing and reveling in our own weakness, we do as Baudrillard suggests, and “before disappearing, certain words, and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know.” Seduction is the key, and Baudrillard makes clear that the primary task may well not be to formulate a “strategy.” Much frustration is generated by our inability to beat power at its own game- the only way out, of course, is “inventing a new rule for the game.”

## II. Symbolic Death

The revolution only opens the way to the problem of death, without the least chance of resolving it. [...] If political economy is the most rigorous attempt to put an end to death, it is clear that only death can put an end to political economy.

A source of great optimism within Baudrillard’s writing is his decoupling of death from the biological cessation of the body’s life. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he writes, “[the] subject’s identity is continually falling apart, falling into God’s forgetting. [...] At the other, symbolic, pole, death and nothingness no longer exist, since in the symbolic, life and death are reversible.” This definition of death helps us speak to the problematic of political violence. Let us adopt the notion that it would be better for there not to be widespread (biological) death as a result of some coming cataclysm (climate change, great power conflict, terrorism). Yet, following Baudrillard, we still hold the notion that somehow we must grapple with death and risk violent death (as outlined in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*). We resolve this seeming tension by noting that while we may have to risk biological death, it is not necessary for this to happen- there must not be a “culling” for us all pass through death understood as radical indeterminacy, as initiation. Given that Baudrillard argues that “[there] have only ever been symbolic stakes,”

and that in the symbolic life and death are interchangeable, in a way we are always already dead (and of course always still alive). Our seemingly non-symbolic, economic-linguistic understanding of ourselves we simply “pay” for through our anxious relationship to biological death.

Baudrillard would wholly agree with Malcolm X that “the price of freedom is death.” Putting your death at stake can win you anything. Yet again, “dying” doesn’t mean biological death, it means a confrontation with radical uncertainty. This means that we don’t have to fight a big war or kill all the rich people or anything like that- we just need to symbolically die as part of an initiation ritual which will allow us to transition to a new challenge and a new seduction. While a meaningful advancement in political theory (since we get out of the problem of building a military power to rival the state), this remains a tall order: for, as in the Matrix, if you die in the game, you die in real life. Hence one aspect of the overcoming of biological death is of course its decertification in the sense that it does not obtain as a concept. Then you cannot take your solace in that we can avoid bloodshed because there is no “blood” or any possible guarantee in the first place. As noted by Epictetus, “[who] told you, then, that these are among the things within our own power?” Yet still, we know that extreme violence and (biological) death are unnecessary, and we can avoid them if we are crafty enough.

The paradox of Baudrillard’s symbolic death is that it remains an ordeal we must pass through, yet that we are always already within. There are only symbolic stakes, after all, and within the symbolic, life and death are indeterminate. Hence we ought not to anticipate some great moment of enlightenment, but should rather simply call attention to what has always been the case. In this regard, our principle succeeds by shrugging off the drive toward distinction. We

must not say that we are inventing anything, or making anything new, or making a change. All we are doing is pursuing the challenge of reality to its logical conclusion in the moment – this is all which ever really occurs. Thus if I issue a challenge to myself and to the world with this paper, it is only because each action, each event (even those which don't occur) can be posited as issuing a challenge.

The conception of discrete blocs confronting each other with opposed and internally coherent ideologies is a fantasy of the Euclidean age of politics, as Baudrillard might put it. We now know that Euclidean space is simply an illusion, and similarly, we must understand that our past political struggles have all been waged on an entirely different terrain than often imagined. Understanding this properly opens the door toward the appearance of the non-Euclidean counter-power, *the* anti-hegemonic principle articulated by Baudrillard in his last works. Should we remain disappointed with this outcome, feeling constrained by Baudrillard's seeming fatalism (and how else are we to understand statements like, “[yes], one runs towards one's fate all the more surely by seeking to escape it.”), all we have to do is remember Nietzsche's radical hypothesis of *amor fati*: there is no reason to fight against the inevitable seduction, and no higher pleasure than playing one's role.

We should also clarify Baudrillard's main method outlined at the end of “Radical Thought,” which focuses on making the world more enigmatic, thus returning a little more than the enigma we were given. We should understand this injunction to make things less clear by understanding that for Baudrillard, this does not mean that we should try to be more confusing than necessary. Instead, we read this method in conjunction with the description from *Seduction* that it is impossible to imagine the truth naked, and that peeling away the layers to get to the

“real truth” leaves us face to face with a new enigma. Therefore, a Baudrillardian politics does not fetishize privacy, since the only secret which is worth keeping can never be found out anyway. We should not fetishize the secrecy of the intelligence agencies- instead, we should push to make things as clear as possible in order to examine the enigma that remains. This is faithful to Baudrillard’s injunction to make things more enigmatic because the new enigma uncovered by clearing away the old mysteries is always more mysterious than the mere social trifles which covered it up.

### III. Transcommunism

“We must therefore displace everything into the sphere of the symbolic, where challenge, reversal and overbidding are the law, so that we can respond to death only by an equal or superior death. There is no question here of real violence or force, the only question concerns the challenge and the logic of the symbolic”

Communism remains the most sensible political theory in that it grasps the need for humanity to take the task of remaking itself and the world to heart and embrace technical progress while raising the floor of everyday life. This last might be called “meeting everyone’s needs,” a formulation we know to be lacking- rather we could express that the world should be hospitable for all. The oft-confronted problem of explaining how communism is supposed to be different than capitalism is a red herring; the whole project of carving out a separate space or new positive conception of reality by which to define progressive politics is a dead end. The only strategy is seduction (and it is a non-strategy). One must be taken by the other, for it is the other which allows us to avoid repeating ourselves forever. Yet one must also be seductive for the other, which is to be aware of the secret complicity underlying all antagonism. This complicity



helps us to understand transcommunism along similar lines to the transpolitical:

transcommunism, means, of course, that everything is communist and nothing is communist. How are we to understand this? We begin with the idea of “primitive communism,” that at one time people were much more equal before we developed more and more powerful means of producing surplus to wield against one another. We also remember Baudrillard’s allusion to the more overt relationship of earlier societies to symbolic exchange. Then we simply apply Baudrillard’s idea that there are always only symbolic stakes to show that underneath all of humanity’s conflict and oppression there remains a shard of primitive communism, of the symbolic relation which sustains humanity beyond the economic, beyond the social. The offensiveness of the term “primitive communism” is apt, for communism is no privileged term within the rhetoric of symbolic exchange. It is simply one of the many ways of saying the same thing, getting at the same secret which must not be uttered (which is easy, since it also cannot be uttered). So, we understand the omnipresence of communism to be identical with the fundamentally symbolic stakes to which Baudrillard believes all other stakes reduce. This is because symbolic exchange picks out the social relation constitutive of whatever category and describes its relationship to all other social relations, which can never be quantified or articulated, but only negotiated through social practices: argumentation, exchanging, haggling.

Of course, we know that while a kind of symbolic communism is beneath everything else in human society (which is to say that there *is no* private property, no capital), transcommunism also implies that nothing is communism. This is the challenge of Baudrillard to communism, which is to articulate in what precise way things will “get better” through social practice. This challenge to articulate a positive value is the one to which all (phallic) productive systems

sacrifice themselves. We understand this challenge to communism (and any politics or goal-oriented activity) easily by understanding that the primacy of the symbolic implies a radical undermining of the concept of time. Communism understood as a relation determined by concepts of labor, capital, and so one loses itself in its worldliness. This timelessness is of course another aspect of the secret, that which cannot be communicated because it is beyond language, beyond the sign. This kind of thinking has usually been dismissed out of hand because we wanted pragmatic theory, theory that challenged the world to stay consistent to the abstract models we had created. Yet the symbolic always shines through in any situation when one realizes the gravity of the stakes involved. In a catastrophe, things change in their “economic value” very quickly- perhaps water is worth nothing because you’re already dying, or a good bandage becomes immeasurably valuable. Still, the point remains that nothing is communist because nothing can be anything in the sense of properly being designated as determinate categories. It is by thinking along these lines that the game of theory plays out, since of course it is absurd to be using determinate categories as I am in order to describe the nature of their non-existence. This limit case shows the symbolic stake in every linguistic act. While we are drawn to skepticism about determinate categories through Baudrillard’s theory, there is also a radical positivity here.

We can build our international relations off of Baudrillard’s politics of hospitality, predicated on the fact that the other enables non-repetition. Hence it is not understood that people are simply given everything “for free,” because you never really do get anything “for free.” Rather, changing our collective practice of owning material objects is part of us establishing a new symbolic relation (or simply calling attention to the always ever-present one) and allowing

for an agreeable outcome to the presently very dangerous situation. It sounds like Baudrillard can offer us the easy way out, but of course with him nothing ever does come so easily. Beyond terrestrial conflicts, beyond the stars, seduction and disappearance await us as the end of the universe and the limits of scientific knowledge. By avoiding any final solution, we will have the chance to glimpse the vital dissolution.